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Flora Lewis

Korea's North Politik

At the moment, everybody here is focusing on domestic politics, with the Government's loss of its legislative majority for the first time, and on the coming Olympics. Electric signs all over town announce the number of days until the start of the Games, now 137.

Safe, successful Olympics are terribly important to the South Koreans and their newfound pride at becoming people of account on the world scene. Despite deep discomfort and mutual suspicion, Government and opposition leaders are making surprisingly conciliatory noises about the need for compromise.

Hyun Hong Choo, Minister of National Legislation, said: "It's the only way. We're not accustomed to the fine art of negotiation with others; it will be a painful process. But we are practical politicians. It's an opportunity to make our politics a little more mature."

The opposition, too, is considering its options cautiously. There are bound to be eventual collisions, but the tone now leans to optimism. And with the Soviet Union, China and most Communist countries set to attend the Olympics, the chances look good that North Korea will refrain from violent attempts to spoil the Games.

Altogether, this is the beginning of a gradual but important change in the area. The new Government is working out a new policy toward North Korea, involving greater effort to expand dialogue with China and the Soviet Union even without diplomatic relations.

It is reminiscent of the Ostpolitik of Willy Brandt, West Germany's Chancellor, a generation ago. Seoul officials call it Northpolitik. In fact, Lee Hong Koo, the new Minister of the National Unification Board, is going to Bonn to consult on how the Federal Republic got East Germany to begin the opening step by step.

No dramatic surprises are in the offing. But the larger significance is re-

The Seoul regime is broadening its policy toward Pyongyang.

flected in a reminder from Soviet diplomats in Asia that East-West détente of the 1970's began with Mr. Brandt's efforts. Moscow's influence seems to be rising in North Korea now, at China's expense, with a two-edged policy of deliveries of sophisticated new weapons and advice to Pyongyang to stay cool. It looks contradictory, but Seoul isn't complaining.

On the contrary, Seoul's new confidence is based on "our economic superiority," Mr. Lee said. That also means South Korea can build its defenses at only 6 percent of rapidly growing G.N.P., while the north is spending some 25 percent of its impoverished people's output.

Seoul no longer aims to isolate North Korea. Instead, Mr. Lee said: "We should try to bring them into the international community. It isn't us but North Korea which needs more contacts with the world. We have to worry that North Korea has gotten itself into a bad corner, even if it sounds condescending."

Two kinds of measures are contemplated. One is a bundle of detailed exchanges, human contacts, postal agreements and such, that have to be negotiated and can take a long time. But meanwhile, South Korea is thinking of a series of unilateral moves it can take, stopping the daily blasts of vituperation, which it is coming to consider non-productive. "We denounce terrorism," Mr. Lee said, but blaming Pyongyang for blowing up a Korean airliner can't "be a permanent obstacle."

Kim Yeong Hee, the 26-year-old North Korean woman whose suicide attempt failed after playing a role in destroying a plane carrying 115 people last November, will probably receive leniency. There was an extraordinary wave of sympathy for her here after she repented. Most South Koreans think of her as a victim of the North's system, rather than a murderer.

That probably won't appease the North's dictator, Kim Il Sung, but it is part of the effort to show people care about their compatriots. Mr. Lee's approach goes further. The new guideline, he says, is no more proposals just for propaganda, but real attempts to engage talks.

If that is serious, it will oblige a lot of changes in South Korea, where it is still illegal to listen to North Korean broadcasts or to have contacts. Because of rigid rules, people here know very little about changes in China and the Soviet Union, and what hasn't changed in North Korea. Student radicals haven't a clue how anachronistic their slogans are: because Seoul's anti-Communist edicts have kept them uninformed and naïve. A visit north could enlighten them.

The new goal, of provoking opening in the North, will also require opening in the South. That would please the opposition and help the move to democracy here. And it could launch the period of East-West détente the